

# Hollis Frampton

I shall admit at the outset that I am a filmmaker. That is to say that I expound, and attempt to practice, the art of film; and, even, that I have gone so far as to make a number of films. Having admitted that much, I might as well also call the question: what am I doing here? Is it as *amicus curiae* (secretly hankering after a backseat consummation with my first Portapak) or in the sinister role of *advocatus diaboli* (my trusty Bolex tucked into that same spot where all but filmmakers hide their concupiscence)? I could say, of course, that I have come to "observe" . . . and that would be true.

A few years ago, Jonas Mekas closed a review of a show of videotapes with an aphorism to the effect that film is an art but video is a god. I coupled the remark, somehow, with another, of Ezra Pound's: that he understood religion to be "just one more unsuccessful attempt to popularize art." Recently, though, I have sensed a determination on the part of video artists to get down to the work of inventing their art, and corroborating their faith in good works . . . so that, sensing so much, I find that I am here to admire, as well. And, if I can, to help.

A large part of the business at hand is, I take it, to understand what video *is*. It is a long-standing habit of artists (in the life of the race it might be our most valuable habit) to postulate a present that is more privileged than the past. Video art, which is by now virtually alone in having no past that is shady enough to worry about, joins, on this occasion, in that relentless search for self-definition which has brought film art to its present threshold of intensity and ambition . . . and which, indeed, I understand to be the most notable trait of the whole text of modernism, throughout the arts, and in the sciences as well.

Moreover, it is doubly important that we try to say what video is at present, because we posit for it a privileged future. Since the birth of video art from the Jovian backside (I dare not say brow) of that Other Thing called television, I for one have felt, more and more, a pressing need for precise definition of what film art *is*, since I extend to film, as well, the hope of a privileged future.

But we know that what an art is, or what it is to be, is to be seen, rather than said. I turn, then, to the mournful Aristotelian venture of trying to say, of film and video art, not what they are, but what they severally are not, and how, and what, they are like.

# The Withering Away of the State of the Art



First of all, then, what delights and miseries do film and video share? Both the film frame and the complementary paired fields of video are, of course, metaphorical descendants of the Newtonian infinitesimal, so that both are doomed, as from a kind of Original Sin, to the irony of mapping relativistic perceptions upon an atavistic fiction of classical mechanics, long since repudiated, along with the simian paradoxes of Zeno that prefigure the calculus, by the sciences. Still more comically, film and video share similar paleontologies: that of film yields racehorses, and that of video, wrestlers. But within the compressed moment that constitutes their mutual Historical Period, we may say that film and video art have in common:

1. A need.

It belongs to the artists who make the art, this need, and it is a need to make images, apparently moving, within what both film and video understand to be a highly plastic temporality. Notably absent is the need, formerly its normal congener, to mark surfaces. Painters still have that need, along with some others, and we may suppose that is why they are painters.

2. A thermodynamic level.

The procedures of most of the arts amount to heat engines; film and video first entrain energy higher up in the entropic scale. Photons impress upon the random delirium of silver halide crystals in the film emulsion an illusion of order; electrons warp the ordered video raster, determinate as a crystal lattice, into an illusion of delirium.

### 3. An ecstatic and wearisome trouble.

I refer to the synaesthetic problem of the place and use of sound in the visual arts. We may take the course of grand opera as a summary of the catastrophes awaiting fools and angels alike in this aesthetic quagmire. It is a commonplace that lip sync sound sank film art for decades. A few film artists, at least in their doppelgänger roles as theoreticians, penetrated some way into the nature of the problem, both before and after Al Jolson uttered those famous *last* words: "You ain't heard nothin' yet!" But I freely admit that film has not, on the whole, advanced very far in that montage for two senses that seems to imply a dialectical mutuality between the dual inhabitants of the human cranium . . . granting, certainly, that we have abandoned the bourgeois assumption that purported surface verisimilitude is Art's Truest Note.

Ten years ago, filmmakers in New York used to say that you could tell a California film with your eyes shut, because there was invariably a sound track, and that sound track invariably consisted of sitar music. Times have changed, but the problem has not, and most video artists seem still to be living in that moment. The unexamined assumption, that there *must* be sound, now yields, typically, the exotic whines and warbles of an audio synthesizer. I am not myself innocent in this respect, so it is scarcely to be assumed that I abjure audio synthesizers, which bear to the symphony orchestra somewhat the sort of relation that a turret lathe bears to a stone axe. Quite simply, though, most of the video sound I have heard bears, at best, a decorative or indexical relation to its coeval image, and at worst (and more often) obscures it.

At least one major filmmaker has, for twenty years, directed against the use of any sound a reasonable rhetoric that has increased in stridency as the muteness of his work has grown more eloquent; the same man has, of course, sinned often against his own doctrine, as we all must if we are to honor the good animal within us.



But again, and yet again, this chimaerical problem of sound rises up to strike us down in our tracks, film and video artist alike, and we cannot forever solve it by annihilating it. Sooner or later, we must embrace the monster, and dance with it.

4. Finally, film and video share, it now seems, an ambition I have heard stated in various idioms, with varying degrees of urgency. It first appears whole, to my knowledge, in a text of Eisenstein dating to 1932, at a time when a similarly utopian project, involving the dissolution of the boundaries between subject and object, *Finnegans Wake*, was in progress. That ambition is nothing less than the mimesis, incarnation, bodying forth of the movement of human consciousness itself.

Now that we have seen how film and video art are similar, how are they like things other than each other?

I think it is clear that the most obvious antecedents of cinematic enterprise, at least in its beginnings, are to be found in painting, an art which, justly losing faith in itself as a technology of illusion, had gradually relinquished its hold on a three-dimensional space that cinema seized once more, for itself, on its first try. The Lumière brothers' passenger train, sailing into the sensorium straight out of the vanishing point of perspective, punctures the frontal picture-plane against which painting had gradually flattened itself during nearly a century. Early accounts of the situation tell us that the image had power to *move* the audience—clean out of the theater—and “instruction” be damned. The video image assumes the frontality that painting has since had continual difficulty in maintaining.

On the other hand, it would seem that video, like music, is not only articulated and expended in time (as film is), but indeed that its whole substance may be referred to in terms of temporality, rhythm, frequency. The video raster itself would seem a kind of metric stencil, *ostinato*, heartbeat. As such, like music,

it is susceptible of being quantified, and thus expressed completely in a linear notation. In fact, it is quite commonly so expressed. I do not refer to anything like a musical "score," of course. The notation of video is called tape, and it is perfectly adequate. The film strip of cinema is not a notation, but a physical object which we are encouraged to misinterpret under special circumstances. Video has, and needs, no such artifact.

Finally: how do film and video art differ, in fundamental ways that define the qualities of both?

We might examine first the frame, that is, the dimensionless boundary, that separates both sorts of image from the Everything Else in which that image is a hole.

The film frame is a rectangle, rather anonymous in its proportions, that has been fiddled with recently in the interest of publicizing, so far as I can see, nothing much more interesting than the notion of an unbroken and boundless horizon. The wide screen glorifies, it would seem, frontiers long gone: the landscapes of the American prairies and the Soviet steppes; it is accommodating to the human body only when that body is lying in state. Eisenstein once proposed that the frame be condensed into a "dynamic" square, which is as close to a circle as a rectangle can get, but his arguments failed to prosper.

In any event, cinema inherits its rectangle from Renaissance easel paintings, which tend to behave like the windows in post-and-lintel architecture. The video frame is not a rectangle. It is a degenerate amoeboid shape passing for a rectangle to accommodate the cheap programming of late night movies. The first video image I ever saw, on a little cathode ray tube at the top of a four-foot mastaba, was circular. At least I think I believe that's what I remember I saw.



Things find their true shapes most readily as they look at themselves. Film, looking at itself, as the total machine that is cinema, rephotographs and reprojects its own image, simply reiterates to unmodified infinity its radiant rectangle, asserting with perfect redundancy its edge, or perimeter, which has become for us inhabitants of film culture an icon of the boundary between the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen, what is present and possible to consciousness and what is absolutely elsewhere and . . . unimaginable.

But let video contemplate itself, and it produces, under endless guises, not identical avatars of its two-dimensional "container," but rather exquisitely *specific* variations upon its own most typical content. I mean the mandalas of feedback, in whose graphically diagrammed illusion of alternating thrust and withdrawal, most often spiraling ambiguously like a pun of Duchamp, video confirms, finally, a generic eroticism. That eroticism belongs to the photographic cinema as well, through the virtually tactile and kinesthetic illusion of surface and space afforded by an image whose structure seems as fine as that of "nature"; video, encoding the universe on 525 lines precisely, like George Washington's face reduced to a dot-and-dash semaphore on the dollar bill, resorts to other tactics.

And as the feedback mandala confirms the covert circularity, the *centripetal* nature, of the video image, it offers also an obscure suggestion. If the spiral implies a copulative interaction between the image and the seeing mind, it also may become, when love is gone (through that systematic withdrawal of nourishment for the affections that is "television"), a navel—the mortal scar of eroticism past—and thus an *omphalos*, a center, a sucking and spitting vortex into which the whole household is drawn, and within which it is consumed.

If I seem to be verging on superstition, please recall that the images we make are part of our minds; they are living organisms, that carry on our mental lives for us, darkly, whether we pay them any mind or not.

Nonetheless, if video and film ultimately unite in an erotic impulse, a thrust away from *thanatos* and toward life, they diverge in many particulars. For instance:

1. We filmmakers have heard that hysterical video artists say: "We will bury you." In one instance—and it is a very important one—I agree entirely. That instance is the mode we call animation. I have always felt animation, in its assertion of objecthood over illusion, to be an art separate from film, using the photographic cinema as a tool, as cinema uses the means of still photography (24 times every second) as a tool. Film and video typically extend their making processes within a temporality that bears some discoverable likeness to real time; and that simply is not true of the animated film. But I suspect that video will soon afford, if it does not already, the means of fulfilling, in something "like" real time, every serious ambition animation retains. And that, of course, would mean a wonderful saving of time, out of the only life we may reasonably expect to enjoy.

2. For the working artist, film is object as well as illusion. The ribbon of acetate is material, in a way that is particularly susceptible of manipulations akin to those of sculpture. It may be cut and welded, and painted upon, and subjected to every kind of addition and attrition that doesn't too seriously impair its mechanical qualities. Upon that single fact of film's materiality, an edifice has been erected, that of montage, from which all film art measures its aesthetic distances.

In short, film builds upon the straight cut, and the direct collision of images, of "shots," extending a perceptual domain whose most noticeable trait we might call *successiveness*. (In this respect, film resembles history.) But video does not seem to take kindly to the cut. Rather, those inconclusions of video art during which I have come closest to moments of real discovery and *peripeteia* seem most often to exhibit a tropism toward a kind (or many kinds) of metamorphic *simultaneity*. (In this respect, video resembles Ovidian myth.)



So that it strikes me that video art, which must find its own Muse or else struggle under the tyranny of film, as film did for so long under the tyrannies of drama and prose fiction, might best build its strategies of articulation upon an elasticized notion of what I might call—for serious lack of a better term—the lap dissolve.

Here the two arts of film and video separate most distinctly from one another. Film art, supremely at home in deep spaces both visual and aural, has need of intricate invention to depart from the “frontal plane” of temporality—an aspect purporting to be neither imperfective nor perfective, but Absolute. Conversely, video, immanently graphic, polemically anti-illusionist, comes to spatiotemporal equilibrium through a dissolution, a fluidification, of all the segments of that temporal unity we call Eternity, into an uncooked version of Once Upon A Time.

Hence the mythification of the seven o'clock news, and the grand suggestion that the denizens of the talk shows are about to be transformed into persons: one feels, almost, Daphne's thighs encased in laurel bark. Hence also . . . distantly . . . television's deadly charm. Is it a cobra, or is it a mongoose?

3. Sigmund Freud, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, suggests that civilization depends upon the delay of gratification. I might caricature this to mean that, by denying myself one hundred million lollypops, I'll end up with a steam yacht . . . and go on to envision a perfect civilization entirely devoid of gratification. But every filmmaker must perforce believe in part of this cartoon, since filmmaking involves long delays, during which the work more than once disappears into the dark night of the mind and the laboratory. I remember, on the other hand, the first time I ever used video. I made a piece, a half-hour long, in one continuous take. Then I rewound the

notation, and saw my work right away. That was three years ago, and to tell the truth some part of my puritanical filmmaker's nature remains appalled to this day. The gratification was so intense and immediate that I felt confused. I thought I might be turning into a barbarian . . . or maybe even a musician.

4. The photographic cinema must be "driven," as synthesizer folk say, from the outside. But video can generate its own forms, internally, like DNA. It is the difference between lost-wax casting and making a baby. The most important consequence of this is that video (again, like music) is susceptible of two approaches: the deliberative and the improvisational. Certain video artists have rationalized the synthesis of their images into closed fields of elements and operations, *raga* and *tala*. It is mildly paradoxical that this work, which seems to me, with respect to the density of its making activity, to correspond to the work of Méliès in film, need produce no record whatsoever, and may suffer itself to remain ephemeral, while the Lumières of video, the improvisational purists of the Portapak, are bound absolutely to the making of tape notations. (I do not doubt that the exterior *experience* of work of either sort may be fully replete.)

5. There is something to be said about video color. One might speak of its disembodied character, its "spirituality," were one inclined. That the spirituality in question is as vulgar as that of the painting from which (I conjecture) it took its bearings, is not surprising. The decade of the sixties saw—or rather, mostly did not see—the early development of the video synthesizer contemporaneously with the hardening of a posture, within painting, that aspired to founding a chasm between color and substance. The photographic cinema, viewing its unstable dye-stuffs as modulators of primal Light, mostly stayed at home and tended to its temporal knitting during a crucial period in chromatic thought.



For those who take note of such things, it will eventually become clear that video won out: were it not for the confusing matter of scale (video, after all, is “furniture,” and has the protruding status of an object within living space; whereas public painting has gradually assimilated itself to the “heroic” scale of public cinema) video images should rightly have replaced a good deal of painting.

6. If the motion we attribute to the film image is an illusion, nevertheless the serial still frames of cinema are discretely apprehensible entities that may be held in the hand and examined at our leisure. When these frames are projected, they are uniformly interleaved with equal intervals of total darkness, which afford us intermittent moments to think about what we have just seen.

Conversely, the video field is continuous, incessantly growing and decaying before our eyes. Strictly speaking, there is no instant of time during which the video image may properly be said to “exist.” Rather, a little like Bishop Berkeley’s imaginary tree—falling forever in a real forest—each video frame represents a brief summation within the eye of the beholder.

7. Since the New Stone Age, all the arts have tended, through accident or design, toward a certain fixity in their object. If Romanticism deferred stabilizing the artifact, it nonetheless placed its trust, finally, in a specialized dream of stasis: the “assembly line” of the Industrial Revolution was at first understood as responsive to copious imagination.

If the television assembly line has by now run riot (half a billion people can watch a wedding as consequential as mine or yours) it has also confuted itself in its own malleability. We’re all familiar with the parameters of expression: Hue, Saturation, Brightness, Contrast. For the adventurous, there remain the twin deities, Vertical Hold and Horizontal Hold . . . and, for those aspiring to the pinnacles, Fine Tuning. Imagine, if

you will, the delicious parallel in painting: a canvas of Kenneth Noland, say, sold with a roll of masking tape and cans of spray paint, just in case the perceiver should care to cool the painting off, or warm it up, or juice it up, or tone it down.

The point is obvious: Everyman has video to suit himself, even to turning it off or on, at minimal expense and effort. I am tempted to see, from one household to the next, an adequation of the broadcast image to the family's several notions of the universe. What a shame it is, we must often suppose, that other people persist in having their furniture so poorly adjusted.

Were we but intelligent enough, we might recognize here a window into the individual mind as unique and valuable as that afforded us by the 21-centimeter radio band into the universe outside our atmosphere.

I would like to close out these conjectures of mine, as suddenly as I can, by embroidering upon an anecdote. It is about an encounter between two fertile artists: Nam June Paik and Stan Brakhage. Both of them have served their visions so long that they have cast aside, in their thought, the withered rubbish (read "hardware") that bears the bitterly ironic rubric "State of the Art." I can imagine Paik showing us video in a handful of dust; and Brakhage striking cinema from flint and steel. Well, anyhow, Paik was showing Brakhage his newest synthesizer, putting it through its paces. I can imagine Brakhage, as he watched Paik elicit from the contraption, at the turn of a wrist, visions of his inner eye that he had labored for twenty years to put on film, feeling tempted by a new and luminous apple. "Now," said Brakhage to Paik, "can it make a *tree*?" I can imagine Paik's ready smile, that seems to come out of innocence, a little slyness, and the pleasure of feeling both ways at once.

"Too young," Paik replied. "Still too young."



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